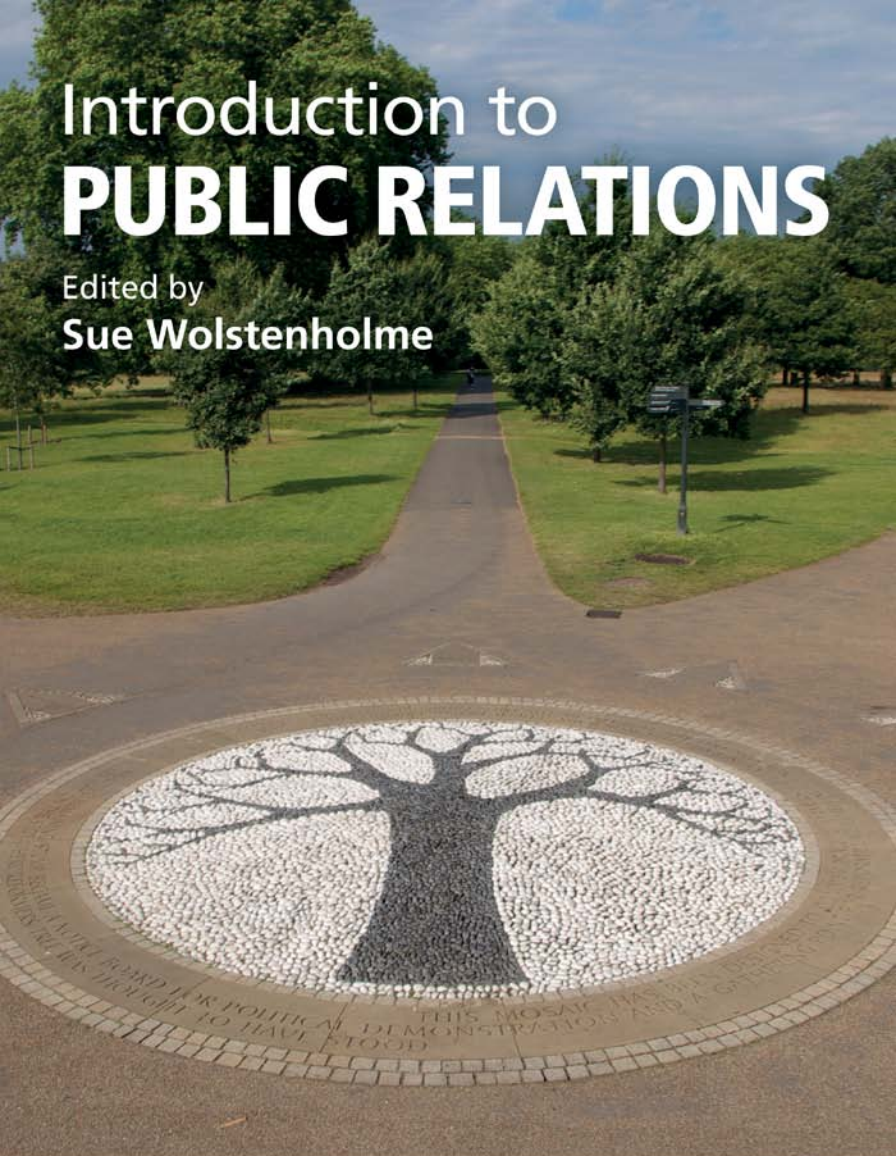


Introduction to **PUBLIC RELATIONS**

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As discussed above, without knowing your publics' interests it would be difficult to arrive at any level of mutual understanding. Sam Black said: 'Under modern conditions no government, industry, company or organisation of any kind can operate successfully without the cooperation of its publics, these publics may be both at home and overseas but mutual understanding will be a potent factor for success in every case' (Black 1989: 8).

Since 2002 the term 'stakeholders' has become more widely used, as practitioners have worked alongside those coming from political or management schools and academics have created theories to try and accommodate the term (Julia Jahansoozi in L'Etang and Pieczka 2006: 86; Grunig et al. 2002: 144; Anne Gregory in Theaker 2008: 55).

David McKie in 2006 expressed concerns about the increasing use of the term stakeholders in public relations. He found, in an analysis of journals, there were the following uses of the term: 22 in *Public Relations Review*; 27 in the *Journal of Communication Management*; 90 in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*; 94 in *Public Relations Quarterly*; 114 in *Public Relations Tactics*.

Dominic O'Reilly, quoted above complaining about the use of jargon, said: 'Whenever I hear "stakeholder", I just think of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' (*PRWeek*, 22 June 2006).

Their concerns are justified. In most public relations textbooks, written in English since 1984, the term 'stakeholders' is often used interchangeably with 'publics' or it is defined as being a number of things, including 'a group whose collective behavior can directly affect the organization's future but which is not under the organization's control' (Emshoff and Freeman in Grunig and Hunt 1984: 297).

Stakeholders can only ever be defined in the terms of the organisation doing the defining rather than in their own terms, and therefore their existence is in the realm of the organisation and any relationship with them is fashioned according to the organisation's intentions for them.

In fact, most organisations, whether private, public, charitable or just existing to put pressure on others to change, set up their communication plans and strategies in their own interest and go on to define those upon whom they want to have an effect. So it has been logical for them to focus on stakeholders. It helps them to identify those who matter most by the interest or impact they might have upon the organisation's success. However, by working in this way they are establishing a situation that is based upon one-way communication, as it is driven entirely from and for only one side's interests and not upon any hope to establish or develop relationships.

There are a number of different types of relationships that need to work for organisations to succeed. They can be grouped as follows (and the categories are not exhaustive):

- commercial – customers, suppliers, agents;
- socio-economic – employees and their families, potential employees, the communities local to any factories, offices or operating areas;
- political – decision-makers at local, regional, national and international levels;
- legal – organisations who have legal power, such as tax collectors, health and safety enforcers or environmental officers;
- professional – other members of the PR profession or allied groups, such as journalists, lawyers or marketers;
- moral – society at large in small or large part who might be affected by the actions or behaviour of the organisation.

All relationships will be built more successfully if they are based upon a good understanding of the others' point of view and can be open to the possibility for effective dialogue. Therefore these generic groups need to be further broken down into the publics they contain.

We are told that stakeholders become publics when they become active and thereby a more real threat to the organisation. Grunig et al. (2002) refer to them then as strategic publics, and when describing stakeholders, Gregory writes: 'When an individual or a group does become active and interested, then they may be regarded as a public' (Anne Gregory in Theaker 2008: 55).

This approach denies James Grunig's earlier situational theory of publics described above, in which publics move from latent (unknowing) to aware and then active.

This concept is still important because the way in which a public becomes aware often dictates the way in which it might become active.

Publics are defined as being groups of people sharing an interest or concern, which makes them ideally suited for engaging in conversations that could lead to relationships, so long as we are prepared to discuss their concerns and interests first rather than just our own at any point in the conversation. Please see the Brent Spar case study below.

ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Case study

Brent Spar

Use the timeline below to track how awareness was raised and what activity took place as a result. Consider how it might have been different if others had made publics aware and provided them with full information.

- **1976:** Brent Spar (or Brent E) was built, largely out of concrete and steel, and commissioned for service as a North Sea oil and tanker loading buoy, operated by Shell UK.
- **September 1991:** Brent Spar was considered to be of no further use and so it was decommissioned.
- **1991–3:** Shell considered what to do with it and carried out full risk and environmental impact assessments. Based upon the results of those assessments, Shell decided to sink Brent Spar at the North Feni Ridge, in the deep Atlantic (approximately 250 km from the west coast of Scotland, at a depth of around 2.5 km).
- **February 1994:** An independent environmental consultancy, Aberdeen University Research and Industrial Services, endorsed Shell's decision for deep sea disposal. Shell began formal consultations with conservation bodies and fishing interests and submitted an application for permission to sink.
- **December 1994:** The UK government approved the plans for sinking.
- **April–May 1995:** Greenpeace activists (as well as journalists) occupied the Brent Spar platform for three weeks, to prevent its being sunk. Greenpeace International organised an international media campaign (the first information about the issue to enter the public domain), leading to a boycott of Shell products and services across northern Europe.
- **30 April 1995:** While on the platform, Greenpeace carried out its own tests and wrongly reported that the Brent Spar still contained 5,500 tonnes of crude oil (Shell's estimate was of 50 tonnes) and a variety of toxic chemicals and heavy metals. The BBC showed film footage, taken by Greenpeace of the occupation, on their main news bulletin.
- **5 May 1995:** The British government granted a disposal licence to Shell UK for the sinking of Brent Spar.
- **9 May 1995:** The German Ministry of the Environment protested to the UK government against the disposal plan.

- **23 May 1995:** Having been trying for some time, Shell finally won an eviction order for the protesters on board the platform. They were taken away by helicopter to Aberdeen, where they held a press conference.
- **11 June 1995:** Shell UK began to tow Brent Spar to the disposal site in the deep Atlantic Ocean.
- **15 June 1995:** The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl joined the protest and complained personally to the British Prime Minister, John Major, at the G7 summit.
- **14–20 June 1995:** Protesters in Germany damaged Shell petrol stations, including one that was fire-bombed. Greenpeace condemned these actions.
- **20 June 1995:** Shell took the decision, due to falling sales and a drop in share price, to withdraw their plan to sink Brent Spar. Shell UK released the following statement:

Shell's position as a major European enterprise has become untenable. The Spar had gained a symbolic significance out of all proportion to its environmental impact. In consequence, Shell companies were faced with increasingly intense public criticism, mostly in Continental northern Europe. Many politicians and ministers were openly hostile and several called for consumer boycotts. There was violence against Shell service stations, accompanied by threats to Shell staff.

Despite the fact that Shell had carried out risk and environmental impact assessments in full accordance with the law at that time, which informed their view that their actions were in the best interests of the environment, they had severely underestimated the Greenpeace-led development of public opinion and emotion. The final cost of the Brent Spar operation to Shell was estimated to be between £60 million and £100 million, taking the loss of sales into account.

- **7 July 1995:** As the plan for deep-sea disposal had been abandoned, Norway granted permission to moor Brent Spar in Erfjord.
- **12 July 1995:** Shell UK commissioned the independent Norwegian consultancy Det Norske Veritas (DNV) to conduct an audit of Brent Spar's contents and investigate the validity of the Greenpeace allegations.
- **5 September 1995:** Greenpeace admitted their inaccurate claims that Brent Spar contained 5,550 tonnes of oil and apologised to Shell ahead of the publication of the DNV report. However, they made it clear that their actions were taken against waste disposal at sea, as a general principle, rather than because of the contents of the platform.
- **18 October 1995:** DNV presented the results of their audit, which endorsed Shell's original inventory of the contents of Brent Spar. DNV stated that the amount of oil claimed by Greenpeace to be in Brent Spar was 'grossly overestimated'.
- **29 January 1998:** Shell announced that Brent Spar would be disposed of onshore and recycled, to be used as foundations for harbour developments at Stavanger in Norway to provide a ferry terminal. While much of the structure went to form part of the harbour development, there was also a large amount of material sent to landfill in Norway.
- **23 July 1998:** Although no connection has been proved between these events, OSPAR's (originally the Oslo and Paris Conventions for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic) fifteen member states announced agreement on onshore disposal of oil facilities in the future.
- **February 1999:** The BBC's main TV News screened an interview with the Conservative, former environment minister, John Selwyn-Gummer, in which he accused Greenpeace campaigners of telling lies and, as a result, causing damage to the whole environmental movement.
- **10 July 1999:** The breaking up of Brent Spar was completed and the first stages of constructing the ferry terminal were started.





A damp occupation by Greenpeace – but the Spar was not dumped

Source: Photofusion Picture Library/Alamy

QUESTION

How was awareness generated, by whom and to whom? And what were the resulting activities? How might it have been different if Shell had brought Greenpeace and other interested publics in for discussions before deciding what to do or if Shell instead of Greenpeace had made their publics aware?

The manner in which a public becomes aware will affect how it might go on to be active and issues management helps us to plan to ensure that our views take others' into consideration and are put forward at the right time in the debate.

In order to build strong relationships there has to be mutual understanding.

Issues management is a system that is most often used to monitor ideas and thinking to inform public affairs activity. In other words, as ideas develop in society, issues managers create strategies to affect the way in which their government will react to them. The term is considered to have been coined by Howard Chase (1984), who defined an issue as being an unsettled matter which is ready for decision.

An unsettled matter can be of great interest as those concerned debate the issues and try to win favour for their point of view. In an election far more effort is made to persuade the undecided rather than spending time with those who are definitely won over or lost. Like



There is a powerful African proverb, which translates as, 'if lions had written histories the tales of hunters would be differently told'.

Source: John Foxx Images

an unsettled matter an undecided person can go either way and therefore is given greatest attention.

In his *Introduction to Public Relations*, Sam Black discusses the need for organisations to be aware of public trends and possible threats to their success, which he summed up as follows: 'issues management is a better term as it suggests that one does not merely monitor change but plans to take it into continuing consideration in planning corporate strategy' (1989: 10).

Monitoring the issues of our publics, as well as our own, helps us to consider and incorporate others' views in our planning and thinking. It can also inform the development of appropriate corporate social responsibility strategies, to ensure that we are being inclusive and responsive to those with whom we need to have good relationships.

Issues management has been written about by many academics and writers, including Robert Heath and Richard Nelson (1986), James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) and others, who have considered it to be about working with the concerns of the client or the organisation involved. They too described how working with publics at an early stage can reduce the impact of their concerns but not in terms of acting to develop their interests favourably for them. They also discussed addressing issues as part of public affairs, to influence politicians in their decision making, as mentioned above.

This chapter encourages readers to extend the practice to include gathering knowledge and understanding of our publics' concerns and interests as well as those of the organisation involved, so that a more balanced conversation can take place.

The importance of issues management is discussed in the Introduction to the *Public Relations Digest*:

if there is going to be any level of excellence in public relations practice, there has to be issues management, which Heath asserts grew out of the fertile ground of the 60s and 70s when deference withdrew and criticism or activism against business grew. He sums issues management up as monitoring, identifying, evaluating,

prioritising, creating response and implementing. Well applied issues management is most likely to lead to a company becoming more socially responsible as it endeavours to build relationships with its publics and Heath here discusses how CSR might take an organisation above reproach by engaging interlocking cultures and building coalitions, keeping the firm ethically attuned to the community. 'People identify because they share symbolic substance that reflects their shared identity and mutual interests' (2009: 75).

The first task for the issues manager is to define the publics with which the organisation needs to have good relationships, to function well. As explained above, 'publics' is a term that academics have debated and many practitioners have abandoned in favour of the now much more commonly used 'stakeholders'. We can be forgiven for losing some patience with academe for its confusion over the terms, as the *Digest* Introduction continues:

Gerard Choo, in Tench and Yeomans, gives a thoughtful and much needed discussion on audiences, stakeholders and publics in chapter seven. Despite thought provoking discussions on reception analysis, audience activity, the linear communication model and a useful consideration of the differing views of media effects, the chapter is still slightly confusing with the assertion that publics need not be stakeholders but that stakeholders become publics. The chapter suggests that publics are always active and therefore stakeholders are latent publics, which will hopefully set some bright minds thinking as to why we need to refer to stakeholders at all.

How does this different style of issues management work?

An organisation's issues management group should be made up of a cross section of the staff, to try to represent, as far as possible, the publics employed there.

They will be monitoring all of their information sources between meetings. The information sources will include a variety of news and social media channels, conversations with friends and family, local gossip and rumours, and contacts that they may have with clubs, societies or pressure groups to which they might belong. This process can be referred to as media tracking and environmental scanning.

In this huge amount of data, much of what each individual sees and hears is ignored, possibly because it is not understood, but most likely because it is of no interest to the individual. Unless there is some identification with a story it has little relevance to the viewer or listener.

Case study

The news for parrots

In the 1970s *Monty Python's Flying Circus* brought us the News for Parrots and for various other creatures such as wombats and gibbons. Michael Palin was the newsreader, with a parrot on his shoulder. The news was similar to broadcasts seen every day except that, when air crashes, natural disasters or events were related they were concluded with the phrase 'but no parrots [or other creatures as applicable] were involved'.

Taken from the script: 'Good evening. Here is the news for parrots. No parrots were involved in an accident on the M1 today when a lorry carrying high-octane fuel was in collision with a bollard. That's